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Disagreeing with Ad? I am not crazy, you know!

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There has been only one time in my life that I did not agree with Ad Foolen. This might be due to Ad's unusual ability to see the merits in all other peoples' opinions, or in a general reluctance we share to adopt controversial viewpoints (or it might be that we both are usually right), but the fact is that we agree at almost all occasions. Except this one time.

I had written a column in a students' newsletter *M'ntaal* (the title is a pun on the word *mental* and *my language*, which is in turn a reference to a popular magazine *Onze Taal* 'our language') about a well-known Dutch advertisement with the slogan:

- (1) *Mediamarkt! Ik ben toch niet gek?*
Media-market! I am PRT not crazy?
'Media-market! I am not crazy, you know!'

I wondered how this slogan generated the meaning that the speaker is a satisfied customer of the Dutch electronics store *Mediamarkt* by questioning his own mental abilities. Somehow the logic seems to be that the fact that the speaker is supposed not to be crazy apparently entails that *Mediamarkt* is the store of his choice. Strangely enough, however, when the first sentence is spoken with interrogative intonation, the meaning is exactly the opposite:

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- (2) *Mediamarkt? Ik ben toch niet gek?*
Media-market? I am PRT not crazy?
'Media-market? I am not crazy, you know?'

Now the logic seems to be that the fact that the speaker is supposed not to be crazy leads to the conclusion that *Mediamarkt* is not the store of his choice. So how can this be?

In my column, I speculated that the phrase *Ik ben toch niet gek* has the meaning "If I would be crazy, I would not X", where the meaning of X is construed from the previous sentence. An affirmative previous sentence, like the exclamation *Mediamarkt!*, which would be taken as *I approve of Mediamarkt!*, would thus give "If I would be crazy, I would not approve of Mediamarkt". In the case of an interrogative previous sentence, this would be taken as an implicit negation (*not approving of Mediamarkt*). This would lead to a meaning "If I would be crazy, I would not not approve of Mediamarkt", which is logically equivalent to "If I would be crazy, I would approve of Mediamarkt".

Ad did not agree with this. According to him, the derived meaning of *Ik ben toch niet gek?* ("I am not crazy, you know") was entirely determined by pragmatic factors. The phrase is nothing more than the affirmation of an opinion that is already present in the context.

In a way, I am inclined to agree with this. Indeed, the exclamation *Mediamarkt!* already gives rise to a positive opinion about this store, and the interrogative intonation *Mediamarkt?* automatically leads to some sort of questioning, which is bound to lead to a negative opinion. So the addition of the phrase *Ik ben toch niet gek?* indeed does not seem to have a decisive effect on the positive or negative opinion. However, I think this observation is slightly beside the point.

So what I will try to do in this paper is this: I will try to show that I agree with Ad, without changing my original viewpoint. More specifically, I will argue that the actual point is not the fact that an exclamation and a question lead to different opinions, but rather that the interrogative form of the first sentence in combination with the addition *Ik ben toch niet gek!* is incompatible with a positive interpretation.

First, let me confirm the observation that *Ik ben toch niet gek?* does not

necessarily determine the opinion the speaker has towards the previous sentence. If the previous sentence clearly states a positive or negative opinion, the addition strengthens this opinion:

- (3) *Ik ga met dit weer eens lekker een wandeling maken. Ik ben*
I go with this weather PRT nicely a walk make. I am
toch niet gek?
PRT not crazy?
'I am going to take a nice walk with this weather. I am not crazy,
you know?'
- (4) *Ik ga met dit weer echt geen wandeling maken. Ik ben toch*
I go with this weather really no walk make. I am PRT
niet gek?
not crazy?
'I am really not going to take a walk with this weather. I am not
crazy, you know?'

The addition *Ik ben toch niet gek?* does not have any effect on the opinion expressed in the previous sentence. In (3), the implication is that I am going to take a walk, whereas (4) implies that I am not going to take a walk. The addition in (3) implies that I would be crazy not to take a walk, and (4) means that it would be crazy to do so.

The particle *toch*, used in a question, triggers a request for affirmation by the listener (or reader) of some logical reasoning (cf. also Foolen, 2006). So in (3), by agreeing with the assertion that the speaker is not crazy, the listener is forced to adopt the intention of going to take a walk as a logical implication:

- (5) If I am not going to take a walk, I am crazy. I am not crazy. Therefore,
I am going to take a walk.

If we take *p* to be *I am going to take a walk*, and *q* is *I am crazy*, this can be seen as the classical syllogism *modus tollens*:

- (6) $[[\neg p \nearrow q] \wedge \neg q] \nearrow p$

This is the reasoning implied in (3). For (4), it is this:

(7) $[[p \text{ } \nearrow q] \wedge \neg q] \text{ } \nearrow \neg p]$

So what we see in (6) and (7) is that the propositions literally expressed in the first sentences of (3) and (4) (p or $\neg p$: *I am (not) going to take a walk*) are presented as the consequens of the syllogism.

My observation in the original column in *M'ntaal* was that the single word *Mediamarkt!* spoken as an exclamation, generated a positive proposition about the store (I feel positive about it, I buy there), whereas the same word uttered as a question (*Mediamarkt?*) generated a negative proposition (I do not feel positive about it, I do not buy there). Assuming this is correct, there is no need to suggest that *Ik ben toch niet gek?* is ambiguous: it simply generates the syllogism with the proposition as its consequens, and its negation in the antecedens.

So far, Ad and I do not disagree (we're not crazy, you know). The proposition is entirely dependent on the first sentence, the affirmation comes from the addition. However, we get a strange result when we look at questions expressing positive opinions like (8):

(8) *Zal ik eens een lekker wandelingetje gaan maken?*
 Will I PRT a nice little-walk go make?
 'Shall I take a nice little walk?'

Especially when spoken to oneself, this apparent question clearly expresses a positive intent to take a nice little walk. This is for the large part due to positive markers like *eens* and *lekker*, and the diminutive form *wandelingetje*, but even without these one can perfectly utter this question with a positive attitude. However, strangely enough, it seems impossible to add *Ik ben toch niet gek?* to this:

(9) *#Zal ik eens een lekker wandelingetje gaan maken? Ik ben toch*
 Will I PRT a nice little-walk go make? I am PRT
niet gek?
 not crazy?
 'Shall I take a nice little walk? I am not crazy, you know!'

Apparently, although the addition *Ik ben toch niet gek?* clearly does not determine the proposition expressed in the previous sentence, I does

seem to impose some restrictions. More specifically, if the previous sentence is a question, the proposition taken to construct the syllogism is the negation of the one expressed. In (9), the proposition that is expressed is that I am going to take a walk, so *Ik ben toch niet gek?* takes the negation of that, and asks for an affirmation of the consequens that I am not going to take a walk. Since this is not the intent of the speaker, a semantic conflict results.

Of course, (9) can be made acceptable by adding non-linguistic information between the first and second sentence. For instance, if the speaker makes a disapproving noise, or grimaces, this is enough to generate the negative proposition, and license *Ik ben toch niet gek!*

This is indeed an unexpected result if only pragmatic factors are at work here. Since the first sentence in (9) clearly expresses a positive opinion, why can the addition not simply take this positive opinion as the consequens of the syllogism? Why is it imperative that the interrogative form with the addition *Ik ben toch niet gek?* is associated by a negative opinion?

The conclusion must be that there is also a grammatical mechanism involved. This mechanism may be related to the fact that questions in themselves seem to be able to generate negative contexts. This has been observed earlier in the context of (some) so-called *negative polarity items*, which can also be licensed by questions. For instance:

- (10) a. George didn't eat *any* breakfast today.
 b. *George ate *any* breakfast today.
 c. Did George eat *any* breakfast today?

Although questions are not overtly negative, Ladusaw (1980) already notices the availability of a biased negative answer (Giannakidou, 2002). Although later accounts argue that the polarity item is in fact licensed by downward entailment or nonveridicality, and not by negation per se (Giannakidou, 2002; Zwarts, 1995), it seems from the observation in (9) that there is indeed some negation of a proposition involved in this case.

I wonder if at this point Ad and I still disagree or not, but I do know that we're both not crazy. And that is a positive opinion.

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